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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR
ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM LE SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: GEMAYEL ON THE PRESIDENCY AND HIS
CONDITIONS FOR CABINET SEAT

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During the Ambassador's 1/12 farewell call, former president Amine Gemayel dismissed Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa's shuttle diplomacy as incapable of solving Lebanon's presidential impasse: only real pressure on Syria, so that the Syrians see that presidential elections are in their interest, would work, Gemayel said. Gemayel also said that he thought the Syrians now want to block Sleiman because, as president, he would zap popularity from Michel Aoun that would harm Syria's hopes of its allies winning the next parliamentary majority in 2009. Gemayel, agreeing that the Siniora cabinet might be around in some form for an extended period of time, said that he would be willing to accept a cabinet seat (replacing his assassinated son Pierre) to increase the Christian weight. But he would insist on PM Siniora treating him, a former head of state, as a real partner in decision making and not simply a Maronite ornament. Appearing to drop the idea, Gemayel acknowledged that other March 14 leaders did not back his call for a "neutral" cabinet, once presidential elections take place.
End summary.

TO GET A PRESIDENT IN LEBANON,
PUSH SYRIA; AMR MOUSSA WILL FAIL

¶2. (C) The Ambassador paid a farewell call on former Lebanese president Amine Gemayel in his Bkfiya residence on 1/12. After hearing the Ambassador's briefing of his breakfast earlier that morning with Amr Moussa (septel), Gemayel (who saw Moussa two days earlier) dismissed the Arab League Secretary General's diplomacy. Moussa will fail, Gemayel said, because he is unwilling to build real momentum against Syria. Unless the international community is serious about pressuring Syria and showing Damascus that it is in its interest to allow the Lebanese to have elections and a cabinet, then the impasse will continue, Gemayel said. Syria is not paying "a real price" for what's happening in Lebanon. "We pretend the problem is in Lebanon, when the problem is in Syria and Iran."

SLEIMAN'S SYRIA PROBLEM:

¶ 13. (C) Gemayel mused that Syria has had second thoughts about Michel Sleiman as president because of the 2009 legislative elections, when Syria hopes that its allies can win the parliamentary majority from the March 14 alliance. To win the majority, the Syria's allies need Michel Aoun to be strong, Gemayel argued. In Baabda-Aley, Hizballah can defeat Walid Jumblatt's list only if the Christians of that district go overwhelmingly with Aoun. In the north Lebanon Akkar region, the preponderance of retired army officers can be counted on to go with Aoun. In Metn, Aoun is weakened -- Hizballah and Aoun were "shocked" that the Aoun candidate won the by-election against Gemayel by only 400 votes -- but could still win. In Zahle, Hizballah needs Aoun to be strong.

¶ 14. (C) But if Michel Sleiman is elected president, Aoun starts shrinking from the first day, Gemayel said. There are Christians who are with Aoun simply because they don't like Samir Geagea "or us" (the Gemayels' Kataib party). Those Christians will flock to Michel Sleiman in a way that they would not to a weak president like Michel Edde or Jean Obeid. Moreover, the Akkar retired officers will stick with Sleiman. The impact on Aoun's popularity is the real reason why Syria now calculates that it is better to block Sleiman, Gemayel argued. While Sleiman is not March 14, he cannot be trusted to do Hizballah's bidding as reliably as Aoun can. And he is unlikely to build an electoral alliance with Hizballah, since March 14 brought him to Baabda Palace.

STRENGTHENING SINIORA'S CABINET

¶ 15. (C) The Ambassador asked Gemayel if he therefore thought that Sleiman's candidacy was doomed. Not necessarily,

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Gemayel responded, while noting that it was hard to predict when there might be presidential elections. And even if Sleiman is elected, then it will be "impossible" to have a quick cabinet formation. The Ambassador noted the arguments that, since Sini ora's cabinet might be around for quite some time -- either as a fully authorized cabinet also exercising presidential powers (if there are no presidential elections) or as a caretaker cabinet for an extended period (assuming presidential elections take place but the impasse persists on the cabinet formation). Given the possibility that the Sini ora cabinet is not about to be replaced, shouldn't it be strengthened as much as possible now, while the cabinet enjoys both its and the presidential powers?

¶ 16. (C) Gemayel acknowledged that some March 14 leaders have proposed that he join the cabinet to replace the seat vacated when his son Pierre was assassinated in November 2006. This would help create a better Christian balance in the cabinet. While a former head of state could not appropriately serve as Minister of Industry ("ridiculous!"), he could be a Minister of State, without portfolio. He would then attend the cabinet meetings, "to change the picture" of the Christian presence in the cabinet. He could help "protect Christian interests" in a way that technocrats like Sami Haddad and Jihad Azour cannot be expected to do. This would help insulate the Sini ora cabinet against the inevitable March 8-Aoun charges that it is intentionally usurping Christian powers, Gemayel said.

¶ 17. (C) But, Gemayel noted, he would only do this if he knew that PM Sini ora would treat him as a "real partner" in decision making. Sini ora is "stubborn" and relies on the smallest circle of advisors. "He trusts no one except Mohamad Chatah and his niece (Rola Noureddine)." Gemayel would need to know that Sini ora will not use him just as a "Maronite ornament." Asked by the Ambassador what he meant in practice, Gemayel raised foreign policy, normally the purview of the president. If Sini ora flew off to see French

President Sarkozy or received Secretary Rice in the Grand Serail, Siniora should include Gemayel in the planning and in the meetings, to reassure the Christians about their traditional role in foreign policy. If Siniora were preparing appointment decisions, he should talk about the Christian appointments with Gemayel rather than presenting a fait accompli on which he would expect Gemayel's signature only.

"NEUTRAL" CABINET: GEMAYEL
ACKNOWLEDGES MARCH 14 OPPOSITION

¶ 8. (C) The Ambassador asked Gemayel about his media comments that he would support a "neutral" cabinet from presidential elections until the next legislative elections. Gemayel said that he did not have support from March 14 leaders for his idea, so it was unlikely that he could pursue the idea. But he thought that it would be best to divert the political discussions to a National Dialogue-type forum, with the cabinet serving in a technocratic capacity, similar to the spring 2005 Mikati cabinet that attended to "housekeeping" issues and oversaw legislative elections. After 2009 legislative elections, the cabinet could again be "political." But, the Ambassador said, doesn't such an approach obliterate the majority-minority differences, and thus hand March 8-Aoun forces a victory by making the two sides appear to be equivalent? A technocratic cabinet will not have sufficient weight to stand up to Hizballah provocation, and the National Dialogue participants are roughly evenly divided between March 8-Aoun and March 14. "It's just an idea," Gemayel said, with a hint of annoyance in his voice, "to consider once we have presidential elections."

FELTMAN